DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 064 645 CG 007 319

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TITLE	Psychosocial Maturity or Social Desirability?
INSTITUTION	Johns Hopkins Univ., Baltimore, Md. Center for the Study of Social Organization of Schools.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
REPORT NO	Rep-131
BUREAU NO	BR-6-1610
PUB DATE	May 72
GRANT	OEG-2-7-061610-0207
NOTE	15p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Elementary School Students; *High School Students; *Maturity Tests; Measurement; Measurement Instruments; *Social Maturity; *Sociometric Techniques; Students

ABSTRACT

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NCERD CG
BR 6-1610

Center for Social Organization of Schools

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ED 064645

REPORT No. 131
MAY, 1972

PSYCHOSOCIAL MATURITY OR SOCIAL DESIRABILITY?

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ED 064645

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Grant No. OEG-2-7-061610-0207

Program No. R16J3

Project No. R16J3B

Ellen Greenberger

Report No. 131

May, 1972

Published by the Center for Social Organization of Schools, supported in part as a research and development center by funds from the United States Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Office of Education, and no official endorsement by the Office of Education should be inferred.

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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

The Center for Social Organization of Schools has two primary objectives: to develop a scientific knowledge of how schools affect their students, and to use this knowledge to develop better school practices and organization.

The Center works through five programs to achieve its objectives. The Academic Games program has developed simulation games for use in the classroom. It is evaluating the effects of games on student learning and studying how games can improve interpersonal relations in the schools. The Social Accounts program is examining how a student's education affects his actual occupational attainment, and how education results in different vocational outcomes for blacks and whites. The Talents and Competencies program is studying the effects of educational experience on a wide range of human talents, competencies, and personal dispositions in order to formulate -- and research -- important educational goals other than traditional academic achievement. The School Organization program is currently concerned with the effects of student participation in social and educational decision-making, the structure of competition and cooperation, formal reward systems, effects of school quality, and the development of information systems for secondary schools. The Careers and Curricula program bases its work upon a theory of career development. It has developed a self administered vocational guidance device to promote vocational development and to foster satisfying curricular decisions for high school, college, and adult populations.

This report, prepared by the Talents and Competencies program, examines a psychosocial maturity scale developed by the program (Greenberger, Campbell, Sørensen and O'Connor, 1971) to show that the scale does measure psychosocial maturity and not social desirability.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank B. James Starr, Alexander J. Seidler, and Margaret M. Marini for helpful discussions of this paper and Joan Bitner for valuable technical assistance. Samuel Livingston contributed useful comments on the manuscript.

ABSTRACT

The psychosocial maturity scale (PSM) described in several earlier papers is a self-report questionnaire. It is vulnerable, as are other questionnaires of this type, to respondents' wishes to present themselves in a socially desirable light. In this study, scores on two social desirability scales are examined in relation to PSM. Correlations between the two variables are very modest, and the trend in the direction of mean scores from grade 5 to grade 11 is different for social desirability and PSM: mean scores on the former variable decline, whereas mean scores on the latter increase markedly. These findings indicate that the PSM scale measures a set of attitudes which are distinct from the disposition to "fake good."

INTRODUCTION

The concept of psychosocial maturity (PSM) has been advanced in an effort to systematize thinking about non-academic educational goals (Greenberger and Sørensen, 1971; Greenberger, 1972). This concept outlines behaviors that permit effective functioning on one's own, in relationships with others, and in the society. Using data obtained for other purposes, a preliminary 54-item scale was constructed that yielded five factors: (1) self-esteem, (2) independence, (3) identity, (4) social tolerance, and (5) openness to change. The first three factors contribute to effective interpersonal relationships, since they tend to control and limit the behavior of others in ways consistent with the individual's best interests. The fourth and fifth factors, according to our most recent conceptualization of psychosocial maturity, contribute to system maintenance, or the preservation of the social system. Tolerance of individual and cultural differences is necessary in a society composed of diverse cultural and subcultural groups and is consistent with the professed humanistic ethic of the society. Openness to social and political change, the fifth factor, is also necessary in a society which is by law meant to be responsive to the mind of the people.

An important feature of the PSM scale is that each item meets two criteria: it has theoretical relevance to the concept of PSM and it sharply differentiates chronologically more mature from less mature children (Greenberger, Campbell, et al., 1971). Consequently, the PSM

scale measures a developmental variable: one which increases with age. (Eleventh grade children score an average of 12 points higher on PSM than fifth grade children.)

Research with the scale has yielded predicted subgroup differences. Whites, girls, and children from more favorable social class backgrounds score higher on PSM than their counterparts. We have generally interpreted these findings in terms of the more intensive socialization to which the higher-scoring groups are exposed and the greater compatibility of components of the PSM concept with the parental practices and subsequent social experiences of children from these groups. An alternative interpretation is that high scorers on PSM, being more strongly socialized than others, are simply more aware of the socially desirable response and more motivated to present themselves in a favorable light (to "fake good"). Are we measuring psychosocial maturity or social desirability?

A first step toward answering this question is described below.

Method

Social desirability scales are typically formed from items where one response is socially desirable (as determined by judges or respondents similar to the group of persons being studied), and the great majority of respondents give that desirable response. A sample item is, "Do you make friends easily?" Striving to make a favorable impression is identified by counting how often favorable self-descriptions are checked. Persons whose behavior resembles the ideal on <u>many</u> dimensions are so unusual that faking is suspected (Cronbach, 1960).

A social desirability scale was not included in the test battery from which the PSM scale was constructed. Therefore we examined the battery to

locate individual items which seemed appropriate for assessing respondents' inclinations to present themselves in a favorable light. Other criteria of selection were that the item was not part of the PSM scale and had been administered to both 5th and 11th graders. From the group of items available, six were selected. Four judges unanimously agreed on the appropriateness of item-content and on the socially desirable response. The items are:

1. If I scratched a neighbor's car with a bicycle, I would keep quiet about it.
2. I clean the papers off the lunch table when I finish, even if some of it is not mine.
3. If I were "fooling around" with the school record player and broke it, I would tell the teacher.
4. If someone in my class wears odd clothes, I tease him about it.
5. I do my homework even if I know the teacher isn't going to collect it.
6. I would help anyone who asks me if I can.

Responses were scored in two ways, to form scales hereafter referred to as Social Desirability 1 and Social Desirability 2. In the former case each item was scored on the 5-point scale used in the original test battery. Labels denoting the points of the scale were "never," "very seldom," "seldom," "most of the time," and "always." The high (5) end of the scale represents the direction of greater social desirability and a score was formed by summing across items. Scores of 5 to 30 can be obtained on this scale. Social Desirability 2 is a scale that measures an <u>extreme</u> tendency to "fake good." Responses were recoded so that "always"

or "never", depending on the wording of the item, received a 1, whereas all other responses received zero. Summing the responses across all six items, the range of scores on this scale can be 0 to 6.

Table 1 gives the average intercorrelation among items scored by the two procedures and a measure of the internal consistency of the scales based on Hoyt's (1941) procedure.[1] For a 6-item scale, the internal

Table 1

Internal Consistency of Two Social Desirability Scales

	Social Desirability 1		Social Desirability 2	
	Average r	Coefficient of Reliability	Average r	Coefficient of Reliability
White (n=2503)	.26	.68	.23	.66
Grade 5				
Black (n=1276)	.20	.60	.26	.68
White (n=2236)	.43	.82	.23	.66
Grade 11				
Black (n=1194)	.47	.84	.22	.63

[1] The reliability coefficient is approximately (I(r)/1 + (I-1)r), where I is the number of items and r the average intercorrelation of the items. This formula is especially useful when r is already available.

consistency is quite respectable. The two measures of social desirability are quite highly correlated with each other: approximately .86 at grade 5 and .77 at grade 11.

Results

The relationship of social desirability to PSM was explored in two ways. First, each social desirability scale was correlated with the PSM total. Second, the mean scores on each measure at grade 5 and grade 11 were examined.

Table 2 shows the correlations between PSM and the two social desirability scores. Correlations were computed separately for each age-race-sex group. All correlations are significant at the 5% level or better.

Table 2

Correlation of Social Desirability Scores with PSM

		Soc. Des. 1	Soc. Des. 2	(n)
Grade 5	White Girls	.33	.25	(1117)
	White Boys	.34	.26	(1164)
	Black Girls	.27	.23	(603)
	Black Boys	.23	.22	(614)
Grade 11	White Girls	.22	.11	(1175)
	White Boys	.31	.13	(1168)
	Black Girls	.30	.14	(622)
	Black Boys	.23	.07	(512)

Considering Social Desirability 1 first, the range of correlations is between .23 and .33. The correlations are highly significant, given the large sample size, but in no case does social desirability explain more

than 11% of the variance in PSM scores. Correlations of PSM with Social Desirability 1 vary only slightly with age and show no reliable sex difference. The relationship between these two variables is somewhat greater for whites than blacks in grade 5, but not in grade 11. Social Desirability 2 tends to be still more modestly correlated with PSM. This is true especially at grade 11. Race and sex differences are virtually negligible.

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations of social desirability and PSM scores by grade level and separately for each race-sex subgroup.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of
Social Desirability and PSM Scores

		Soc. Des. 1		Soc. Des. 2		PSM	
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Grade 5	White Girls	24.3	4.3	3.3	1.7	32.0	1.1
	White Boys	21.8	5.0	2.5	1.7	31.5	7.4
	Black Girls	22.0	5.2	2.8	1.9	27.1	6.7
	Black Boys	20.2	4.8	2.1	1.7	26.3	7.1
Grade 11	White Girls	24.7	3.6	2.8	1.6	44.0	7.0
	White Boys	21.2	4.5	1.6	1.5	41.1	8.2
	Black Girls	22.3	4.6	2.4	1.5	39.0	9.9
	Black Boys	18.8	4.6	1.3	1.3	36.8	10.1

For Social Desirability 1 there is little change over time, except for one subgroup: black boys. For Social Desirability 2 there is a clear pattern of decline, each subgroup scoring lower at grade 11 than at grade

5. The average PSM score, on the contrary, shows a stable and marked pattern of increase over time. This fact makes it clear that the two variables in question have a different course of development and are by no means identical in nature.

Discussion

This paper began with the question: psychosocial maturity or social desirability? It is clear now that PSM is not simply a measure of the tendency to present oneself in a favorable light. In point of fact, the dichotomy suggested by the question is misleading in one respect. Awareness of societal norms and values and realization of the utility of functioning in accord with these norms is an important component of maturity. Insofar as the motive to present oneself in a favorable light must include awareness of approved attitudes and values, the two concepts are not completely distinct. Some degree of overlap between measures of the two concepts is to be expected, although a high degree of overlap would be undesirable. Such overlap is undesirable since the emphasis in measures of social desirability is on unrealistically favorable self-presentations or faking good; this characteristic is absent from the concept of psychosocial maturity.

In this study, the two measures of social desirability depart from typical measures of this kind. In neither one is there a response-option which is both "suspiciously" favorable to the self and endorsed by a high percentage of respondents. (As mentioned earlier, the issue in measuring social desirability is to identify respondents who endorse not one but many such self-descriptions.) Of our two measures of social desirability,

the first is perhaps the poorer measure of the concept. It treats all responses as more or less indicative of a social desirability motive by assigning a score of 1-5 to every response. To reply to the question, "If I were 'fooling around' with the school record player and broke it, I would tell the teacher," with most of the time earns a score near the top of the response-distribution, but does not seem clearly indicative of faking good. There is a substantial difference between this admission of occasional laxity and the response always. Furthermore, to answer such a question never should not perhaps be seen as a sign of a low need to present oneself favorably; this response may in fact tap rebelliousness or a need to "fake bad." The low end of the scale, in other words, may reflect a different dimension. The second measure, Social Desirability 2, seems more closely linked to the concept it purports to assess. It taps, item-by-item, an extreme form of favorable self-presentation--so extreme in fact that a majority of respondents do not endorse the one (extreme) response coded for social desirability.

It is especially meaningful, therefore, to observe that Social Desirability 2 yields the more encouraging answers to the question raised by this paper. Correlations with PSM are very low; and the trend in the direction of mean scores from grade 5 to grade 11 is opposite from that for PSM. A conclusion that can be drawn from this fact is that over time, children simultaneously grow less concerned to present a rigidly favorable façade and become more psychosocially mature.[1]

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[1]This conclusion must be qualified with a reminder that although it seems reasonable to infer "over time" trends, the study is in fact based on a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal design.

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